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ABSTRACT

Research on determinants of parenting behavior has traditionally focused on parents' goals and beliefs about child rearing or on the effect of parents' own attachment experiences. In an effort to relate these two approaches, a study was conducted to examine parent behaviors and attitudes in 94 parent-child dyads. Dyads consisted of 20 fathers and 74 mothers, and 53 boys and 41 girls (from 4 to 7 years of age). One-third of the dyads were referred by child protection agencies as being involved in child abuse or neglect. Parents completed an Adult Attachment Interview and were then categorized as either secure/autonomous, dismissive of the importance of attachment relationships, or preoccupied by early attachments. In addition, parents' attitudes were assessed with regard to the extent of control they or their children have over parent-child problems, attribution of responsibility and intentionality in their children's actions, and their own negative thoughts after a difficult interaction with their child. Results of the study indicated a strong relationship between parents' thoughts on childrearing and their mental representations of relationships (representations acquired very early in childhood). While attribution of responsibility/intentionality did not seem to be affected by attachment classifications, parents categorized as preoccupied attributed to themselves more control over bad interactions, attributed more bad behavior to the child's personality, and reported more negative thoughts on interactions than did parents categorized as secure or dismissive. (Contains 10 references.) (BCY)

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Mental Representations of Relationships, Parent Belief Systems, and Parenting Behavior

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Recent work on the determinants of parenting behavior has been carried out by researchers working within two quite separate theoretical frameworks. One group, from the social cognitive tradition, has been concerned with the effects of parents' cognitions on parenting behavior. These researchers have demonstrated that the thoughts, goals, and beliefs about childrearing that parents have in a particular situation will direct their behavior. Parents who believe that misbehaving children have acted intentionally to harm them, for example, or who see themselves as relatively powerless in the childrearing situation, will become angry and punitive in their interactions (Bugental, Mantyla, & Lewis, 1989; Dix, Ruble, Grusec, & Nixon,1986; Dix, Ruble, & Zambarano, 1989). Parents who have short-term goals, wanting only immediate compliance from their children, will be more power assertive than those who are also interested in long-term goals such as internalization of values and standards (Kuczynski, 1984).

The other tradition guiding current research investigations comes from attachment theory, with the suggestion that experiences individuals have in their early interactions with caretakers are the basis for development of their mental representations of relationships, and that these mental representations determine the way they interact with their own children. Thus secure mothers, by and large, produce secure babies, while insecure mothers produce insecure babies (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). In addition, secure mothers interact with their children in teaching situations in a warmer and more responsive fashion than do insecure mothers (Crowell & Feldman, 1988).

In spite of the fact that social cognitive theorists and attachment theorists are both interested in parenting behavior, there has been little overlap in their approaches (although Bugental (e.g., 1991) has certainly noted that the schemas of powerlessness that she describes are consistent with Bowlby's notion of working models of relationships). This paper begins with a brief overview of the two approaches and how they explain the parenting process. It then moves to an attempt to explicitly relate them.

First of all, the social cognitive approach. We know that cognitions drive parenting behavior. Bugental and her colleagues, for example, have shown that mothers who are low in perceived control in problem or failure caretaking situations, i.e., who believe they have little ability to influence children and that their children have high control when things are not going well, are more sensitive or reactive to potentially threatening interactions. They behave inappropriately as their feelings of lack of power leak through an outer facade of competence and their inappropriate behavior continues to promote problems with children who are already behaving badly. Mothers who are low in perceived control are also more likely to use abusive discipline such as kicking, biting, and beating up as well as coercive discipline such as spanking, pushing, and slapping. In another approach to understanding parent-

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ing, influenced, like Bugental's, by attribution theory, Dix and Grusec (1985) have argued that discipline interventions are affected by the appraisals or attributions parents make of the causes of specific child behaviors. If parents hold their children responsible for an antisocial act, believing that the child caused negative effects that were both foreseen and intended, then they will be more likely to punish the behavior than if they believe it was unintentional. When a parent believes, on the other hand, that a child lacks knowledge about the negative outcomes of his or her acts and therefore has not intentionally caused harm, he or she will be more likely to employ explanations and reasoning, techniques that impart knowledge to the child. Again, evidence provided by Dix and his colleagues indicates that parents who make attributions to intentionality and personality are more punitive than those who attribute their children's bad behavior to lack of knowledge and situational variables.

Now to attachment theory. Through the use of Main and Goldwyn's Adult Attachment Interview (Main & Goldwyn, 1991), in which participants are asked about their early family relationships, categories which correspond to infant attachment classifications can be assigned to parents. Secure/autonomous individuals may report either positive or negative childhood experiences, but their state of mind with respect to these experiences is coherent, open, and objective. They are warm and supportive in their childrearing behavior and clear and helpful in their direction. Adults classified as dismissing of attachment attempt to limit the influence of attachment relationships in their thinking, feeling, and behavior, while making an implicit claim to strength, normality, and independence. They are controlling, task-focused, cool, and remote in their social interactions with children. Finally, individuals classified as preoccupied by early attachments or past experiences seem confused, unobjective, and mentally entangled in their descriptions of relationships, being either passive and vague, fearful and overwhelmed, or angry, conflicted, and unconvincingly analytical. They also go to great lengths to illustrate that relationship problems lie in the parent. In relationships with their children they swing between warmth and gentleness and coercion, puzzlement, and anger (Cohn, Cowan, Cowan, & Pearson, 1990; Crowell & Feldman, 1988).

Now for the merging of these two approaches. Note that working models of relationships include beliefs about the self and about others, and that these beliefs are elicited in any interpersonal relationship, including one that involves conflict between parent and child. The suggestion is that at least some parent cognitions elicited in the discipline setting have their basis in and are generated by working models parents have about relationships in general. The link between the social cognitive and attachment approach, then, is that cognitions that direct parenting behavior may have their origins in mental representations of relationships. Accordingly, in our work, we predicted that there would be relationships between adult attachment classifications and parenting cognitions. One would expect, for example, that dismissive parents who go to great lengths to maintain an image of themselves as strong, normal, and independent, would not allow a child's misbehavior to threaten this image: Thus they would attribute low control over failure to themselves and high control to the child as well as high degrees of intentionality to the child. Given their high degree of self-confidence one might also expect them to have few negative thoughts about their parenting abilities. In contrast, preoccupied parents, always determined to place responsibility on the parent, may attribute high control to themselves. They should also be expected, in acord with their views on responsibility in the child-rearing situation, not to

attribute control over bad behavior, or intentionality, to the child. Because of their inclination to ruminate over difficultites we also expected that preoccupied individuals would have more negative thoughts in unsuccessful childrearing situations.

These hypotheses have been tested as part of a large-scale study of adaptive and maladaptive parenting carried out at the University of Toronto in collaboration with Gary Walters. We assessed aspects of the behavior of parent-child dyads, one-third of whom were referred to us by child protection agencies as involved either in physical abuse or neglect. The remaining dyads had no record of maltreatment and were matched on a variety of demographic variables. The sample of 94 dyads reported on today includes 20 fathers and 74 mothers, 53 boys and 41 girls.

Parents and their children (between the ages of 4 and 7 years) came to the University for a day of testing. Included in the assessments made were the following measures relevant to the hypotheses.

1. Parents were administered an Adult Attachment Interview. On the basis of this interview they were categorized as being either secure/autonomous, dismissive, or preoccupied. The AAI also identifies individuals who are unresolved with respect to a loss or traumatic event: For purposes of this work, however, only the three major categories of secure, dismissive, and preoccupied were used.
2. Three classes of parenting cognitions were assessed. The first involved administration of Bugental's Parent Attribution Test (Bugental et al., 1989). This instrument yields separate scores for the extent to which parents see themselves and see their children as having control over the failure of adult-child interactions. The items used in this test were based originally on a multidimensional scaling analysis of the free responses given by mothers to questions about the causes of caregiving outcomes. The second measure of parent cognition assesses parents' attributions of responsibility, intentionality, and blame for negative outcomes and comes from the work of Dix and Grusec (1985). Parents were read six short vignettes in which a child misbehaved and were asked to rate the extent to which the child knew he or she was behaving badly, knew the behavior would upset the parent, should have known better, deserved blame, and to what extent the behavior was typical, i.e., part of his or her personality or due to situational variables such as boredom, excitement, or not thinking very hard. The answers to all but one of these questions were highly intercorrelated and so a summary measure--the average of ratings for the correlated measures over the six stories--was used, which is referred to as the intentionality measure. The measure which did not correlate was that having to do with attribution of behavior to situation vs. the child's personality and so is considered by itself, although averaged over the six stories. The final measure of parent cognition was of the negative thoughts parents had after they had had a difficult interaction with their own child. Every parent who came to the lab was videotaped with their child in a playroom setting where they were asked to get the child to clean up at the end of play. Later the parent was shown a videotape of this interaction and asked to identify a time when things were not going well and they thought their child was acting badly. They were then given a list of 10 thoughts that parents sometimes have and asked to check off ones that might have come to mind. Half the thoughts were positive or adaptive, such as "I know I can handle this" and "It could have been worse". The other half were negative, such as "I can't take it much longer" or "I feel ineffective and helpless. Nothing I do seems to work".

In all, there were six measures of parent cognition. Two of them come from the Parent Attribution Test, with one a measure of perceived adult control over failure and the other perceived child control over failure. Two relate to attributions of responsibility, with one having to do with attributions to knowledge and blame or intentionality and the other with attributions to personality as opposed to situation. The last two were the mean number of positive and the mean number of negative thoughts the parent reported having in a situation in which they were having some difficulty with their child. Parents were divided into groups on the basis of their AAI classification, with 72 classified as secure, 13 as dismissive, and 9 as preoccupied.

The mean scores for the six cognitive measures appear in Table 1 for the secure, dismissive, and preoccupied groups. (Standard deviations were similar for the three groups on all the measures.) Scores for perceived control and attributions to knowledge and to personality could range from 1 to 7. Scores for thoughts could range from 1 to 5. Preoccupied parents attributed more control over failure to themselves than did secure or dismissive parents. Preoccupied parents attributed less control over failure to their children than did secure parents, while dismissive parents attributed more control over failure to their children than did secure parents. There was no effect of attachment classification on attributions of intentionality. Preoccupied parents, however, attributed more bad behavior to the child's personality (as opposed to situational factors) than did secure parents or dismissive parents. (Note that this finding was contrary to prediction.) Finally, preoccupied parents reported having more negative thoughts than did either secure or dismissive parents.

It would appear, then, that there is indeed a relationship between the thoughts parents have about childrearing and their mental representations of relationships--representations acquired very early in childhood. Dismissive parents attribute high control to their children over caretaking failure and have very few negative or self-doubting thoughts. Thus, in difficult childrearing situations, they maintain a facade of strength and competence, by shifting responsibility for negative outcomes to their children and by controlling the content of their thoughts. The picture presented by preoccupied parents is very different. They see themselves in control of caregiving failure and their children as having very little control over what goes on. They also engage in a great deal of negative thinking when they do not apper to be doing well in the parenting role. Contrary to prediction, they appear to attribute children's misdeeds to something about their personalities, rather than to temporary situational factors. This latter finding may not be so contradictory, however, when we consider the nature of preoccupied parents. Their enmeshment in relationships, their inability to differentiate between themselves and others, may lead them not only to assume responsibility for negative outcomes themselves, to ruminate in a negative way about their abilities, but also to ascribe bad behaviors to an enduring feature of their children because such behavior would be an indication of their own failure.

In summary, these data suggest to us that parent cognitions may be mediators between parents' working models of relationships and their parenting behavior. We are currently looking at correlations between these three aspects of parenting to see if this hypothesized linkage actually occurs. Thus we expect to find that dismissive parents will be punitive and rejecting in their chidrearing behavior, while preoccupied parents will be inconsistent from one time to the next and therefore confusing. Some preliminary evidence for the existence of such relationships comes from our analysis of the reports

of social workers about the abusive parents who were part of our sample of parents. These social workers, who had the abusive parents as their clients, were asked to rate them with respect to the severity of physical abuse they were known to have inflicted on their children. Dismissive parents were rated significantly higher in amount of physical abuse than were preoccupied parents.

One final observation is in order. If the expected relationships between attachment category, parenting cognitions, and parenting behavior hold up there may well be implications for the modification of parenting behavior. If parenting cognitions have their basis in working models of relationships, then changing parenting cognitions may not be the most effective way to change maladaptive parenting behavior. We may have to tackle the underlying mental representations of relationships instead, a somewhat more complicated undertaking.

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Mean Ratings of Parent Cognitions and Mean Number of Thoughts as a Function of Attachment Classification.

	DISMISSIVE	SECURE	PREOCCUPIED	
ADULT CONTROL OVER FAILURE	4.15	4.26	4.94	Pre>S=Ds
CHILD CONTROL OVER FAILURE	4.50	4.02	3.54	Ds>S>Pre
ATTRIBUTIONS OF INTENTIONALITY	4.35	4.82	4.47	
ATTRIBUTION TO PERSONALITY	3.07	2.64	3.87	Pre>Ds=S
POSITIVE THOUGHTS	2.87	2.28	2.48	
NEGATIVE THOUGHTS	.87	.39	1.43	Pre>Ds=S